



Connect Four: Digital Inclusion

Preliminary Event Report



We are People Know How, a Scottish charity working with people and communities to develop innovative strategies and services to address social issues. Having delivered projects around digital inclusion for over five years, we are committed to sharing our learning and collaborating towards real tangible change. We are proud to present our findings from our event, Connect Four: Digital Inclusion which we held in November 2020 in partnership with the Carnegie Trust, Good Things Foundation and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.



The event was developed after our digital support grew in demand due to the coronavirus pandemic, leading to our development of Computer Delivery, our emergency COVID-response project which has delivered over 900 devices to the community. Once a device is received, recipients can also join our Learn Digital project, helping them to improve their digital skills to use the device. We also operate the Connecting Scotland national helpline. With demand for all of these projects growing, the need for action in Scotland to combat digital exclusion has become increasingly clear.

In November Connect Four: Digital Inclusion invited key voices in digital from across the academic, public, third and business sectors to take part in discussions to facilitate tangible change towards digital inclusion for all. Talks from speakers set the stage for breakout room discussions yielding insightful conversations between attendees. We have now reviewed all the discussions that took place and have collated the findings into this preliminary report. This will form the basis of our response to the Scottish Government's consultation paper, 'Renewing Scotland's full potential in a digital world'. Thanks to your participation in our event, we will add our collective voice to the dialogue to tackle digital exclusion and in particular, data poverty.

In January we will publish our full report, kickstarting 2021 as a brighter, more digitally included year. We will also be holding further Connect Four events – subscribe to the Connect Four network to be the first to know all the details:
www.peopleknowhow.org/connect-four/network

Data poverty and digital inclusion



During the event we heard from speakers Ben Macpherson, Minister for Public Finance & Migration and MSP for Edinburgh Northern and Leith; Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal and Chief Information Officer and Librarian at the University of Edinburgh; Claudia Baldacchino, Graphic Designer & Communications Officer at People Know How; and Adam Lang, Head of Nesta Scotland. This set the stage for the breakout rooms by showcasing the issues and solutions that have been identified around digital inclusion in organisations from different sectors. The conclusions drawn from this first half of the event were that there are three main aspects of digital inclusion – getting the devices, improving digital skills and staying connected. Many organisations represented including People Know How, and initiatives like Connecting Scotland have been addressing the first and second of these aspects, but solutions we can provide to connectivity continue to be temporary ones.

“About 800,000 people and over 300,000 households in Scotland still do not have any form of internet access at home. For some this will be a question of simple economics – the inability to afford a device or the cost of ongoing access. Others may have some form of device but are among the 20% of the population that have low or no essential digital skills, and People Know How has been very active in that space.” (Ben Macpherson MSP)

Data is currently something that must be obtained at an ongoing cost. Devices like the MiFis provided by the Connecting Scotland scheme can provide a set amount of data for a set amount of time, but once this runs out additional data must be purchased.

“We’ve been able to give a number of families MiFi devices for free for 6 months. But that’s only 6 months, that’s only putting a plaster on the wound...You can’t give a device and connectivity then turn around and say “Have you enjoyed it for that 6 months? Great we’re taking it back now!” (Breakout Room)

Connecting Scotland has already recognised this issue, increasing the data provided for future devices to two years, however this is still a temporary solution. Looking ahead past emergency responses to the pandemic, to when those provided with temporary solutions to data poverty find themselves disconnected, it becomes clear that we need to identify a sustainable solution to data poverty. And in doing so, we must first recognise the inextricable link between digital inclusion and social inclusion.

“We’ve asked every single person if they’re having to claim their benefits, if they’re having to go to the doctors, pharmacy, or do their shopping - to keep away from people and do it, if they can, using technology. So how can you not have it as a part of any argument going forward? If you cannot access any of those normal day-to-day services, you’re isolated.” (Breakout Room)

In recognising this link, a further recognition follows that data is the toughest obstacle to digital inclusion, and thereby greatly impacts on social inclusion. But why, then, is internet not viewed alongside other basic utilities such as electricity, gas and water?

“Nobody should be without heat and water, and nobody should be without internet access. I think that, how you find the people that don’t have it and solve that, is a key aspect and that is the first building block.” (Breakout Room)

Recommendations

Connect Four: Digital Inclusion was a space in which to plan for tangible change. As such, many of our breakout rooms produced recommendations towards achieving digital inclusion in Scotland.

1. Link internet access to public spaces

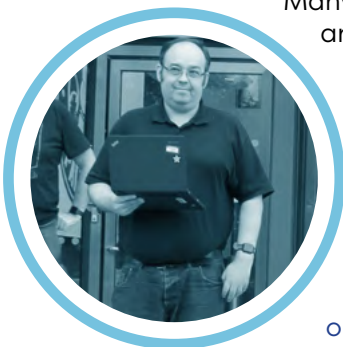
By linking internet access to public spaces, free internet can be provided in hubs where the need for data has been identified. One breakout room discussed using spaces like large offices that are not currently in use to create hubs in the community and help people who cannot afford individual access to the internet.

“At the moment, it would be ideal if it was just a basic right that everybody had. But just thinking about all the companies that people have been working from home from and not needing the office space as much, a potential solution could be creating hubs in the community...they could create centres, hubs and communities where people could go along and get access.” (Breakout Room)

2. Regulate internet service providers as a basic utility and stop overselling

In Gavin McLachlan’s talk he described thinking about the internet as the fifth or sixth basic utility alongside electricity, water, gas and sewage – which are built into social housing. By placing internet alongside these necessities, we can begin to explore the idea of regulating providers, demystifying broadband contracts and preventing companies from overselling data.

“I think we need it to be affordable, and the people that can pay for it can pay for it, and the people that struggle should be given a level of protection that is afforded with electricity and heating, it is that kind of essential utility thing, and the public services have a duty to make it affordable to access...Access to the internet is essential to modern day life, it should be a part of household bills, but it should also be affordable, I mean ultimately it’s the poverty issue, people need to have enough cash in order to pay for things that are essential. I think there’s a two-pronged approach - ensure it’s made affordable for people that are struggling and that we look at embedding it in the wider issues like poverty in general and the other knock-on impacts.” (Breakout Room)



Many breakout rooms discussed the difficulty and confusion of contacting and negotiating with internet providers regardless of digital skill level. Many drew parallels with existing services and measures that had been taken to regulate systems such as purchasing train tickets:

“Your discussion around not being able to find the right tariff and those sorts of things, and the difficulty with that, really put me in mind of how the situation used to be with train tickets. You’ve probably been through that nightmare at some point – 500 different versions of a train ticket and you can’t find what the best one is, and the names that they describe them with don’t make any

sense. But a few years ago, that was changed, I think by the regulator. You still have lots of different ticket types and so on, but they have to show you the cheapest one first, and if you go to the ticket booth to try and get one, they absolutely have to sell you the cheapest one.” (Breakout Room)

To put ideas like this into effect, many looked to the government to provide affordable internet or legislation for providers, with some suggestions to link it with the benefits or council tax systems.

3. Provide internet to tenants in social housing within rent costs

Combining the first two recommendations, attendees inferred that connectivity should be provided to tenants in social housing alongside water, gas or electricity. In addition, affordable payments could be included within rent.

“Whether it’s about housing associations themselves taking on that responsibility or some more forms of regulations and guidelines or instructions to provide affordable connectivity.” (Breakout Room)

4. Make access to public service websites free of charge with no data or airtime required

The internet has become an essential part of modern-day life, with many essential services most easily accessed online. For those who cannot get online this may lead to exclusion, isolation and a loss of time and money.

“Thinking about accessing things we take for granted, like banking, and certain products and services, they’re all going online, or they’re already online. The government definitely has a place to play in this, maybe host, maybe playing a part in resource, or bringing the funding or budget, and linking and bringing people together.” (Breakout Room)

Avoiding the common dilemma of addressing different elements of poverty in silos (period poverty, fuel poverty, food poverty) was a common talking point in our breakout rooms. Similarly, by acknowledging data poverty as part of poverty as a whole, the concept of the poverty premium comes into play, defined by the [Citizens Advice Bureau](#) as “a term used to describe how those on low incomes often pay more for essential goods and services”. Looking at this alongside data emphasises the need for access to these essential services to be free of charge.



“The poverty premium is very much about how people can get online and make savings across the board and the way they live their lives in accessing additional services. So it is an interesting conversation to have about how it is one issue but it’s being reflected through people’s access to services and how they’re able to grow their lot in life.” (Breakout Room)

One solution would be to discern between websites that provide a public service and therefore should be accessible to all citizens, and websites that serve a more recreational

purpose. The former could be free of charge and consume no data.

In looking to collaborate with providers and organisations to implement such measures, attendees had positive hopes for collaboration, particularly in looking to other areas in which similar goals have been met:

“I think a lot of the organisations want to be leveraged for good. There’s probably a willingness on both sides. It’s just that we’ve seen from the success from Canada and other countries where they get government together with telecom providers to think about how they’re going to end digital poverty for example.” (Breakout Room)



5. Run a place-based pilot

At People Know How we believe in asking the community what they need and developing projects to support that need. In this spirit, we would recommend running a place-based pilot giving everyone in a disadvantaged community (SIMD 1 & 2) unlimited data. From here the impacts can be researched, providing a foundation for the dissemination of a wider programme.

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